

Dear Santa Fe County residents,

At the meeting of the Board of County Commissioners in early July, we did something that was new and groundbreaking (not a pun) in the area of land conservation and protection of agricultural capabilities in our community. This was through our Open Space and Trails Program and is described in detail below. I see what we did as setting a precedent as to how the County might be able to help promote more local food production -- an activity that is gaining increasing attention.

Please feel free to contact me with questions and comments, as well as to pass this on to whomever you think might be interested.

Sincerely,
-Kathy

Purchase of Conservation Easement:

The County spent \$70,000 out of County Open Space and Trails funds for part of a conservation easement to protect 17 acres of agricultural land at Rancho Valle on the Santa Cruz River. You are probably asking yourself why the County would be making such an unusual purchase. This was indeed a new initiative for the County.

First of all, I would like to briefly describe what a conservation easement is. It is a restriction placed on a plot of land in perpetuity, mainly to prevent further subdivision that would lead to a higher density of human occupation. It can specify that only a portion of the land can be reserved for a house or two, but it can also require that the rest of the land remain agricultural in use. Putting an easement on land often has the effect of reducing the value of the land since, in most areas in our County, developing land with houses or businesses is generally a much more lucrative use of land than agriculture. The reduction in value can (at this point in time) be used to get federal and state tax credits.

In New Mexico farm and ranch lands are disappearing at a steady clip, and an important part of the reason for this is of course related to the land being worth more for development than it is for agriculture or open space -- for now, at least.

Santa Fe County has recognized that a shortage of land for local food production may become a problem for our region in the future for a variety of reasons, and we have made it our policy to work toward preserving agricultural land (as well as open space for recreational uses).

So let me describe to you what we did in this case. The County committed \$70,000 worth of matching funds that will be combined with \$190,000 in funds from the Federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program to purchase a conservation easement (that is actually estimated to be worth \$400,000) on a 17-acre parcel of agricultural land near the Santa Cruz River. The New Mexico Land Conservancy is the non-profit that applied for the \$190,000 in federal grant money, and it is also the entity that is setting up the agricultural easement. The County will be named as

a co-grantee of the conservation easement, but it will be the Land Conservancy that has the responsibility of monitoring and stewarding the land, as well as making reports to the County on a regular basis.

When the conservation easement has been put in place, the owners of the land will receive the funds from the County and from the federal grant. Note that they are receiving \$260,000 in funds for a parcel of land that is worth far more than that on the open market. The owners will then donate the land to the Santa Fe Farmer's Market Institute. The Institute will manage the land in the future and make it available to local farmers for food production.

One of the important effects of this initiative is that it will make land available to people in our area who would like to be farmers, but cannot do so, due to the high price of agricultural land.

The reason that the BCC can commit funding to a project like this is that in 2010 the Board unanimously passed a resolution in support of encouraging and helping landowners to protect the open space character of their agricultural land in perpetuity, particularly small parcels of such land. The resolution specifically recognized that there are a number of benefits to our local community:

- preservation of the history and cultural heritage of agriculture as a traditional way of life;
- enhancement of local food security by preserving the means of local production;
- enhancement of affordability of agricultural land for current and future farmers;
- providing wildlife habitat and connectivity for wildlife corridors;
- preservation of the scenic qualities of the County that benefit all of the County's residents and support the County's tourism industry;
- enhancing the local economy by circulating dollars within the community;
- keeping water on the land and available for production;

The above is directly from the resolution that passed in 2010. And the resolution goes on to say that

"It is the policy of Santa Fe County to encourage private landowners to voluntarily protect the open space character of their agricultural land in perpetuity, particularly for those specific parcels of land greater than one acre in size (or smaller areas in the case of orchards) comprised predominantly of land (a) with soil types identified by the United States Natural Resource Conservation Service as "soils of statewide importance" or equivalent; (b) identified in New Mexico Office of the State Engineer hydrographic surveys as being irrigated; (c) that is served by an acequia or is part of an acequia association; (d) with appurtenant irrigation rights; and/or (e) with a history of actual use as producing farmland. On lands where agricultural production

depends on irrigation, water rights sufficient for such irrigation must be included as part of the voluntary preservation."

We in the County have recognized that food security is going to become ever more important as the productivity of our land -- across the whole country -- becomes ever more strained due to global climate change. In fact, the massive heat wave and drought in the Midwest this year is giving us an important picture of the future challenges that we are going to face. We need to diversify our food production, rather than continue to rely on large centralized agribusiness if we want to maintain any level of resilience in the face of unpredictable weather patterns.

-Kathy Holian

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